THE CHALLENGES OF COMPARING MEDIA SYSTEMS — AN INTERVIEW WITH DANIEL C. HALLIN

HALLVARD MOE AND HELLE SJØVAAG

In this interview, Daniel C. Hallin offers hindsight concerning his collaborative project with Paolo Mancini — Comparing Media Systems — Three Models of Media and Politics (2004). Hallin discusses methodological difficulties with comparative media research, answers both praise and criticism of their work, and contemplates the development and state of the field. The field of comparative studies is still only in its adolescence, argues Hallin, and asserts theory development as well as empirical studies of media systems is still called for and indeed long overdue. He urges researchers to push beyond the frontier of the countries studied in Comparing Media Systems, and consequently further develop comparative media theory.

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Over the last few years, comparative research has assumed an increasingly prominent position in political communication. One of the key contributions preparing the foundation for this development is the systematic conceptual work of Daniel C. Hallin and Paolo Mancini and their book *Comparing Media Systems — Three Models of Media and Politics* (2004). In this interview, Hallin talks about some of the central aspects of this work — among them methodological challenges, criticism and revisions — and the state of the field.

Comparing Media Systems is an attempt to identify systematic connections between political and mass media structures. Its vantage point equals that of Siebert, Peterson and Schramm's *Four Theories of the Press* (1956) — a book that according to Hallin and

Hallvard Moe and **Helle Sjøvaag** are Ph.D. candidates at the University of Bergen (e-mail addresses, respectively, hallvard.moe@infomedia.uib.no and helle.sjovaag@infomedia.uib.no). The authors thank Daniel C. Hallin for agreeing to this interview.

Mancini (2004, p. 10) has "stalked the landscape of media studies like a horror-movie zombie for decades beyond its natural lifetime." Both endeavors pose the same question: Why is the press as it is? Why does it serve different purposes and appear in widely different forms in different countries? Hallin and Mancini (2004, p. 1) assert that the field of communication has only made "limited progress" in addressing these questions. In subscribing to a critique of *Four Theories of the Press* for its lack of empirical analyses of the actual functioning of media and social systems, and indeed for failing to undertake comparisons, Hallin and Mancini (2004, p. 10) call for a decent burial of the zombie (see also Nordenstreng 2006).

The authors emphasize the basic functions of comparative analysis as "concept formation and clarification and its role in causal inference" (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, p. 2). As such, they stress the appropriateness of comparative analysis as an entrance to understanding variation and similarity within media systems. In the introduction they note that, "comparative analysis makes it possible to notice things we did not notice and therefore had not conceptualized, and it also forces us to clarify the scope and applicability of the concepts we do employ" (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, pp. 2-3). The book presents three models of connections between media systems and political systems: The 'North Atlantic or Liberal model' (attributed to the USA, Great Britain, Canada and Ireland); the 'Mediterranean or Polarized Pluralistic Model' (represented by Southern European countries and France); and the 'North/Central European Democratic Corporatist Model' (comprising the Nordic countries — Iceland excluded — Germany, the Netherlands, Austria, Belgium and Switzerland).

Trained as a political scientist (PhD 1980, University of California, Berkeley), Hallin has over the last 25 years researched the role of the news media in democratic politics. Whether studying the media and war in Vietnam (Hallin, 1986), analyzing television coverage of U.S. elections, or the news media's role in the public sphere (Hallin, 1994), Hallin has retained a keen interest in empirically based, critical political communication research. Currently, he chairs the Department of Communication at the University of California San Diego, where this interview took place in late November 2007.

Moe and Sjøvaag: In the introduction to the book you state that as the field is relatively primitive, a broad synthetic comparative analysis such as the one you have undertaken is not only extremely valuable but also difficult to do (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, p. 5). What initially triggered your attention to comparative studies of the media?

Daniel C. Hallin: It is a field that is long overdue. When I first came into the field of communication there was not any tradition of comparative research. Every political science department in the United States is expected to have a class on Japanese politics, a class on French politics, a class on African politics, but that kind of thing did not exist in communication departments. That was very surprising. And then at the same time, the people who did comparative politics or political sociology never studied the media, even if

there was reason to think that the media might actually be pretty central to what they were talking about. They did not study it at all, so it is really long overdue.

In the book's preface you explain that the project evolved gradually from joint empirical studies. How did it turn into a project of constructing models based on studies of the historical origins and development of media systems in the U.S., Canada and Western Europe?

We knew that there was this gap in the field of comparative media studies — that there was not any real theory. The idea of the models is something we debated about — whether that was the right approach to it. We also though that a reason why everybody likes that old book *Four Theories of the Press* partly is that this idea of particular models is a kind of appealing way to synthesize knowledge. But the idea also had a lot of problems, and so we had some discussion about if it was the right way to do it. We finally thought it was, again partly because if you can organize the cases that you are discussing into ideal types of that sort, I think that it is just a lot easier to organize the material.

The other way to talk about it would be simply in terms of different variables, and the way that different variables affect one another. But we also were very interested in understanding media systems in a kind of holistic way — understanding the way the different elements of a media system are interrelated — the logic of a system; the reasons why they hang together in the particular ways that they do; and their evolution historically. We also thought that it really was true that you did not just have a kind of random collection of cases — which happened to have different levels on the different variables — but you really did have in some sense coherent media systems that had distinct logics that had developed in different parts of the world.

Clearly, examining the dimensions you identify in the book across all the selected cases entailed an immense methodological task. Dealing, then, with a very basic challenge: How did you go about conducting the necessary data collection, and what were some of the problems you encountered in this process?

We relied heavily on secondary data, and also dealt with enough different countries that we were going to have uneven levels of expertise. There were language problems too. We know Roman languages, and had access to the original literature in some countries and not others. In some countries we could actually watch the television news broadcasts or read the newspapers, and in others we could not. And there is also just a tremendous amount of history to learn about different countries.

Another thing that was a problem with some countries is the debates among the scholars. They did not all agree with one another, and so it is not like you could just read the literature and there it was, that everything was laid out. So sometimes we were worried that we were going to read certain texts and then discover that there was some totally other school of thought within media studies that we were not aware of which does not agree with that interpretation at all. And in some cases — once we learned about them — we tried to actually lay out some of those debates.

The result of this would be that the amount and quality of data varied between the countries included in the survey. Did the reality of this inequality of data access force a choice between downscaling to the least common denominator and developing individual cases?

We did not scale it down to the least common denominator. We do talk more about some countries partly because there is a bigger literature about those countries, and some of the literature is really interesting. We were willing to make it uneven. If we found the literature that we thought illuminated some of the conceptual issues we would really discuss that. There was pretty extensive discussion of Spain, for example, and that partly has to do with linguistic reasons: We could really do more work there than in some other countries. We interviewed Spanish journalists and read a lot of literature, and so we went pretty far with that example. In other cases we had a lot of trouble finding material in English, particularly some of the smaller countries. We were just hoping that we would get enough good quality literature that we could make a competent discussion of it and raise the issues we wanted to.

This book was not like the *Euromedia Handbook* [e.g. Kelly et al. (Eds.) 2004], where we wanted to just go through each country. Our project was really more about the logic of the underlying systems, and we do not really think of all the different individual countries like totally separate cases, because there are sort of common roots to the different systems. So to some extent, we can illuminate the logic of a particular model using whatever country we know the most about. And that is fine. And we are hoping it will apply reasonably well to similar systems in other counties.

This aspect points to one of the factors which moderates the book's ambitious scope: The number of countries are limited, delineated to North America and Western Europe. This leaves a clear task for further conceptual developments, does it not?

We have been spending a lot of time thinking about how it applies to other countries that we did not study, and I think that there are somewhat different questions that apply to reception in different areas — the countries that we did study and in countries in the rest of the world. I think that there is actual development going on in the field, although I think it is at the beginning. And I do think that there is some tendency to say "well, how can we fit our case into this framework" — rather than thinking "OK, how can we develop it further." And this applies especially to parts of the world that we did not study. So what we would really like to see is for people to not just apply our categories, but to think about how to do this same kind of analysis in their part of the world. This would involve developing new theory, including new models, new conceptual distinctions, and introducing new variables, or different values of some of the variables that we introduced. Obviously, this is harder than just applying the framework. People are beginning to do some pretty interesting work in that respect, but most is still in progress.

A second moderating factor for the book seems to lie in its consistently cautious tone. The field is described as open, and the steps taken as preliminary. Such reservations

contrast with the seemingly overwhelmingly favorable reception of the book. What did you make of its reception?

We have been a little surprised that people have not found more faults. We really thought that people were going to find faults with our characterization of particular cases and say "no, you really got things wrong about this country and that." But we have not found as much of that as we thought. And we *were* careful — we sent the manuscript around a lot. So from that point of view it has been a little bit surprising. I do think that partly we expected it to get a really positive response because we knew that there was this gap. We though in a certain way it was going to be easy for us because we did not have competitors.

Probably the thing that we worry about most about the reception is that people are going to be over-enthusiastic and forget our qualifications. We gave this big critique of *Four Theories of the Press*, and we worry a little bit that instead of putting that to rest we will *become Four Theories of the Press*. Rather than taking our work as a starting point, everybody will try and fit their studies into it.

An overall positive response does, of course, not rule out critical points, or suggestions of needed supplementation. One such point relates to the role of religious institutions. Nick Couldry (2007, p. 249), for instance, calls for further discussion of their importance, or lack thereof, in "the social infrastructure within which media industries are variously embedded in different places." How is the role of religion addressed in the models?

I think of religion as being pretty important. First of all in the systems that were characterized by segmented pluralism. One of the main things that they were segmented by was religion. And religious institutions had a lot to do with the early development of the press in different ways. In one way in the democratic corporatist countries, and in other ways in other countries. So in that way religion is important.

I think you could argue that we do not emphasize it enough in the section about the liberal countries. Because one of the biggest exceptions to the usual pattern to neutral catchall media, in the United States particularly, is religious broadcasting. And we mention that, but we do not develop it particularly strongly.

If you look outside the countries that we dealt with, religion might take a much more central role than it does even in our analysis. And that is one of the places where people working on other countries might have to adjust the emphasis. If you were looking for instance at the Arab world or India, it might be that religion will be much more important. In the latter part of the book, where we talk about secularization of society and the way that changed the media systems, we are using a religious metaphor. But we are talking both about secularization in the more literal sense — that people do not have the attachment to those religious groups — and we are making an argument that there is a kind of parallel process that happens with other kinds of ideological groups. It may be that part of the argument here has to do with the fact that we are not just seeing secularization, but we are also seeing the reemergence of the importance of religion, which would be a counter-trend.

I think you can certainly make an argument that that is a recent trend changing media systems which deserves more analysis.

A second, quite obvious thing to comment on is the — openly acknowledged — absence of computer mediated communication, specifically the Internet, in the book's discussions. How would that enter into the picture, or compel changes?

The Internet and digital media in general is a big hole in the book. This is partly because it was hard enough to find the basic data on the press and broadcasting where there are decades of research. In the case of the Internet people are just beginning to do research. They are just beginning to figure out how you do research about the Internet — what kinds of questions you ask and how you get the data — so the literature is not very extensive. There are probably very interesting differences among systems regarding the role of the Internet. I think comparative analyses of the Internet would be really useful, and I also think that probably our analysis will be useful for people working on the Internet. Again, if they are willing to be creative about developing new theory.

One point we make is that media systems are not homogeneous. It is not like there is a kind of single logic of a media system that is reflected in all the different media within it. So, for example, the press and broadcasting are usually organized according to somewhat different philosophies. This party has to do with when they originated historically, and the character of the historical era in which they originated. And it also partly has to do with their competition with other media, and how they define themselves in relation to other media. And I think one could assume the same thing would be true of the Internet: That Internet develops in a period of neo-liberalism — a period when the older media rooted more in the political system are breaking down — and a period when the kind of political culture that was based on organized social groups is breaking down. I think that really affects what the Internet is. Clearly, if the Internet had developed in the 1930s, it would have developed very differently than now. So I hope that the analysis will be useful to say "OK, this is where we were when the Internet started developing." Understanding that context would help to do an analysis of how the Internet changes.

And also to analyze how the Internet is integrated in different ways in different systems?

Yes, the Internet probably plays a different role in different systems depending on what kinds of media it is competing with. I also think it is probably an open question how much the Internet changes the media culture and how much it adapts to the existing media culture, which may be different in different systems.

A third point of discussion concerns relativism: Should one undertake value judgments of the different models?

This is something that comes up in a lot of these discussions with people who study the rest of the world besides Europe. It has to do with the question of whether the polarized pluralist model is understood in a kind of negative way in the book. For some, the polarized pluralist model is defined in largely negative terms: It is defined by what it does not have basically, and it is also defined as kind of a deficient system. This is an important question

because we make the argument, which I think is really true, that the polarized pluralist model is actually the most universally relevant, in the sense that it is closest to the experience of all the rest of the world than the other models.

Although we do understand it, we see such a reading as a misinterpretation of the book. We were really trying to understand that particular kind of a system on its own terms, and we were trying to make an explicit argument that even though this model deviates a lot from global assumptions about what a media system is supposed to be, and even thought the literatures within these countries are often very critical — and there are good reasons why they are — there is no clear empirical evidence to suggest that the actual functioning of these systems is deficient. There is no evidence to say that, for instance, the media in Spain are less adequate for democratic politics than the media in Britain or the United States. And that is an important part of the argument for us.

I think we reflect the fact that these are hegemonic discourses. I think we would say that if you look carefully at what argument we are making it is specifically not true that the polarized political system is uniquely defined by the absence of certain characteristics. It is partly defined by the absence of journalistic professionalism for example. But it is also true that the liberal model is partly defined by what it does not have: It does not have a history of media rooted in organized social groups because the commercial press knocked those out of the media system. It also does not have the kind of positive role of the state that you find in other media systems. It does not have ideological diversity of media systems. So our intent, at least, was to write a fair presentation of the different media systems, and to argue explicitly that we did not think there was a legitimate basis for saying one is better than the other one. Our interest lay rather in trying to understand them all by comparing them with the others. For example, we thought that it was really interesting to understand the liberal system partly by the absence of what we call the representative press, which was displaced by the commercial press. And that point is discussed in the Anglo-American literature, but I think it becomes easier to see the significance of it if you look at it in comparison with systems that do have that kind of press.

Is this understanding of the polarized pluralist model as an inferior system related to differences in contexts — and does it occur in certain parts of the world?

People from Northern Europe often just take it for granted that of course that is true. The question is raised much more often by people from other areas who are troubled by that, and wonder if it is sort of an orientalist understanding.

It is kind of a delicate issue to deal with because I think we both see ourselves as critical media scholars. In all of the different literature we were reading we often would look for critical scholarship that did not take it for granted that a specific system serves the public, but rather was looking at the ways in which different media systems were rooted in the particular power structures of those societies, and raised issues about their democratic role. As I was saying, a lot of the literature in the countries that belong to the polarized pluralist system is pretty critical, and we identify with those scholars just as we identify with the

critical scholarship in the liberal system as well. So we do not want to just shove those kinds of critical questions about the polarized pluralist system under the table.

I think to some extent the comparison is useful for critical scholarship. We do not want to blunt that, at the same time that we do not want to make it sound like this is a sort of reincarnation of modernization theory, and that the polarized pluralist is the backward media system, because that is not our interpretation.

Partly, what we believe is that media systems are rooted in particular historical circumstances and at a certain point it does not make sense to say "is this one in the abstract better than that one"? Each system has to function within a specific historical context. In some ways you could say that a lot of countries in the world have harder histories than North America and Northern Europe, at least in the current era: They have worse political conflicts now, they are poorer, and the media have to function within those boundaries. But that is not exactly a value judgment — that is just the reality of history.

The very basis for comparing national media systems is of course the identifiable differences between them. Considering the forces of globalization in a broad sense, some media scholars have expressed concern that differences will become so minor that comparing between different nationally bound systems does not make sense any more. Do you share this view?

I would say there are two kinds of questions there. One of them has to do with the unit of analysis, and our unit of analysis is basically the nation state. So one question is whether that will no longer be the relevant unit of analysis for comparative analysis — because there is just so much globalization. The fact that the relevant unit of analysis is the nation state has to do with the relation between the media and the state — the political system. If the media become less connected to the national political system, then their differentiation by nation state could diminish. So one question is what is the unit of analysis.

The other question is how many real differences are there. Is there just complete homogenization so you have the same media culture? Clearly, I think the differences have diminished, but I think really important ones remain. Just as a within globalization studies, more recently there has been a reaction to talk about the disappearance of the nation state — the increasing irrelevance of the state. Instead, scholars point out that "no, the state actually still matters." I think that you have to make the same argument in relation to media systems — that yes, there are still real differences.

A key argument in the book is that the different systems are converging to a certain degree — predominantly in the direction of the liberal model. How do you consider this position now, four years later?

I think we obviously see a convergence towards the liberal model. We see it in the decline in political parallelism in Europe, the decline of the party press and so on. We see it most dramatically in the commercialization of media in much of the world.

Some people have attributed this argument about convergence toward the liberal model to us, and seen us as kind of defenders of that position. We do not exactly see it that way.

The convergence theory was first of all a possible objection to what we were doing. We were setting up this picture of these different models, and so some people were saying "is not this all ancient history, because now they are converging"? And we thought that the reality of that convergence — and also the strength of this argument, this theory of convergence — was something we had to take into account. We had to understand the reasons behind it. Yes, it *is* true that the distinctiveness of these three models is no longer as evident as it was in, say, 1970. But at the same time we were trying, in the chapter where we focus on convergence, to balance that argument out by saying that there are also powerful forces that work against convergence. We try to outline those, and we do not think that the differences among these media systems have disappeared, and we really do not think that they are going to disappear. In fact, the evidence seems to suggest that they are not.

The other thing that I think I would argue even more strongly today than when we wrote the book is that convergence goes in both directions. So it is not just everybody else becoming more like the liberal model, but there are some ways in which the liberal countries are becoming more like Europe. And the most important thing is the re-emergence of political parallelism, the re-emergence of partisan media in the United States. And that actually started in some sense with religious broadcasting, but it's continued to become increasingly important. Also, one of the places where you find it most evident is on the Internet. So the fact that we do not discuss the Internet in the book makes that a little less obvious than it could have been. But the places where you find the re-emergence of political parallelism in the liberal countries are above all in cable television, in radio and on the Internet.

In a series of contributions spanning some 20 years, Michael Gurevitch and Jay G. Blumler discuss the state of the field of comparative political communication. Initially, in 1975, they labeled the field as one in its infancy (Blumler & Gurevitch, 1975). In 1990 they described the field as having progressed to adolescence (Gurevitch & Blumler, 1990), and in 2004 they talked about the field's "maturity," referred to it as "poised," and claimed comparative research had even become "fashionable" (Gurevitch & Blumler, 2004, pp. 325).

It *is* fashionable now, but I do not think it is mature. I would say it is still in its adolescence, as far as I am concerned.

So what is needed in order to advance from the state of adolescence that has characterized the field since the early 1990s?

We need more theory and more development of the theory, particularly trying to push it beyond the frontier of these relatively few countries that we studied. We need more data, and we need more studies. It takes a long time for a field to really develop itself, and I think that where we will be a couple of decades from now will look very different from where we are now.

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